

# LITERACY ADVANCE OF HOUSTON

## *CLEAR & TO THE POINT: THE IMPORTANCE OF USING PLAIN LANGUAGE*



Literacy Advance *of* Houston

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## Literacy Advance *of* Houston

Mission:

*Transforming lives and communities  
through the doorway of literacy.*



# *Setting the stage*

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There's *plain language*, and  
then there's *plainer language*...



## PLAIN LANGUAGE

### Plain Language: Getting Started or Brushing Up

This website consists of five sections and a checklist you can print. In each section, you will find a number of cards you can flip through to learn about using plain language in your work. When you are done with the final section, you can print a certificate of completion.

Where would you like to go? If you are new to plain language, begin with [Before You Start Writing](#).



[www.nih.gov/clearcommunication/plainlanguage](http://www.nih.gov/clearcommunication/plainlanguage)

*Special thanks to the National Institutes of Health,  
whose website and plain language information were both  
helpful and influential as we learned about this topic!*

## Today's session:

*What is plain language?*

*What is it not?*

*Why is plain language important?*

*How can we incorporate plain language into our activities?*



*What is plain  
language?  
What is it not?*

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# Plain language IS:

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Language that  
effectively communicates  
with the **specific audience being  
addressed.**



# Plain language IS:

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**Grammatically correct** language  
that includes  
complete sentence structure and  
accurate word usage.



# Plain language IS:

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**Clear writing and speaking that tells the reader exactly what they need to know, without unnecessary words or confusing expressions.**



# Plain language is NOT:

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- Unprofessional writing or speaking.
- A method of “dumbing down” or “talking down” to the reader or listener.



# Plain language is NOT:

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A one-size-fits-all formula  
in which there is only ONE  
right way to say things!



*Speaking and writing plainly  
is an intentional **approach**  
that we adopt in order to  
help those around us.*



# *Why is plain language important?*

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Communicating  
clearly is  
its own reward!





You may not know  
when someone is struggling  
to understand.



# *Why is plain language important for US?*

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# SUMMER SHOT BLITZ



*How can we  
incorporate plain  
language into our  
activities?*

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# AIMS & AUDIENCE



Complication  
≠  
Importance



# Get rid of verbal “fluff”

## Avoid idioms





Pay attention to:

- Word choices
- Verb forms
- Structure & layout
- Visuals



# ***The Ten Commandments of Plain Language***



# *WORD CHOICES:*

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1. Use common, everyday words.

When technical terms are necessary, make sure they are defined. Avoid acronyms.

Repeat in different words.





so

accordingly

later

at a later date

use

utilize

if

in the event that

can

be able to

When can you come to class?

When might you be available  
for classes?



# *WORD CHOICES:*

29

2. Use “we”, “you”, and other personal pronouns.

Try to avoid the third person.





we

the Agency/the Staff

you

all clients/learners

when you come back to class

students returning to class

please talk to us

contact a member of staff

# *WORD CHOICES:*

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3. Use positive,  
rather than negative, words  
and try to avoid exceptions.





Please come to class every week. If you miss too many sessions we will take you out of the class.

If you are over 18 years of age, you should...



Failure to attend class on a regular basis could result in the termination of your enrolment.

All persons except those under 18 years of age should...

*\*NOTE: The negative can be appropriate if you're cautioning the reader, as in: "Don't bring children to class."*



# *WORD CHOICES:*

33

4. Avoid idioms  
and other words or phrases  
that could be confusing  
to a non-native English speaker.  
  
Pay attention to numbers.





Free immunization  
for children!

Summer shot blitz

You can come to our office any  
time.

Everyone is welcome to drop  
by the office any time.

On December 1.

On December first.

Take a brochure when you go.

Grab a brochure  
on your way out.

Your test score shows us that  
you are ready to graduate.

You've tested out of our  
programs.

# *WORD CHOICES:*

35

5. Remember that “shorter” often equals “better” – but not always!

Try to choose words that have the most universal recognition.





information

computer

OK

class

student

free



# *VERB FORMS:*

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6. Use the active voice,  
and avoid the passive voice  
wherever possible.





We will contact you.

You will be contacted by a  
Literacy Advance staff  
member.

We will grade your test.

Your test will be graded.

Please complete your form.

All forms should be  
completed.

Look at the Student Bulletin  
Board for more information.

Further details can be found  
on the Student Bulletin Board.



# *VERB FORMS:*

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## 7. Use action verbs.

Action verbs are short and direct.

Talk directly to your readers –  
use imperatives when appropriate.





consider

give consideration to

applies to

is applicable to

attend

be in attendance

Fill in your registration form  
carefully.

All students should be careful  
when filling in their  
registration form.

Come to class on Tuesday.

Classes will commence on  
Tuesday.



# *VERB FORMS:*

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8. Use the simple present tense.  
Avoid complicated verb forms  
when you can.  
Avoid the “-ing” form wherever  
possible.





Please tell us if you change your address.

You must call the Student Absence Voicemail if you will miss class.

When will you come back to class?

When can you come?



Students who have changed their address must contact Literacy Advance.

All students who are going to miss class should first call the Student Absence Voicemail.

When do you think you'll be coming back to class?

When you do think you'll be able to make an appointment?



# *STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT:*

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9. Use logical layout, including parallel construction and easy-to-read design features such as bullets and tables.





When you come to class, you should always:

- Come on time
- Sign in at the front desk
- Wait in the lobby



When you come to class, you should always:

- Be punctual
- Don't go into the room early
- The staff will decide when the class is full

# STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT:

45

10. Use plain fonts, avoiding distortions such as ALL-CAPS, *italics* and underlining. Pay attention to white space and line breaks.

Develop consistent use of visuals and other helpful images.





# Help with:

- jobs
- resumes
- education
- more!



# [www.houstonmoneyweek.org](http://www.houstonmoneyweek.org)

## Classes and information about money





# Wrap-up:

*Questions, comments,  
discussion...*





THANK YOU!  
GO FORTH AND SPEAK  
PLAINLY!



[www.literacyadvance.org](http://www.literacyadvance.org)



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